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SUBJECT: VINCENTIAN PM GONSALVES THREATENS MEDIA OUTLET, CIVIL
SOCIETY

REF: 09 BRIDGETOWN 737; 09 BRIDGETOWN 774

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SUMMARY

11. (C) In what has become a standard political bully tactic, St. Vincent Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves has lobbed threats of legal action at a local radio station sympathetic to the main opposition party, a London-based campaign strategizing firm working with the Opposition, and a civil society activist -- and post's International Women of Courage nominee -- who also holds public office. While the legal threats are classic Gonsalves political fare when publicly challenged, the timing of the threats suggests that the PM is worried that his reelection prospects are in trouble, given the opposition's resurgence following the government's failed November, 2009 constitutional referendum. His high-handed tactics may only serve to reinforce the emerging public perception of him as intolerant to dissent from within and without his party. End Summary.

IWOC NOMINEE CHARGED

12. (C) Civil society activist and Communications Manager for the Vincentian Tourism Ministry, Anesia Baptiste, was charged February 16 by the Public Service Commission with sixteen counts of misconduct as a public servant. She was given fourteen days in which to respond to the charges. Baptiste, an International Women of Courage (IWOC) nominee, will be recognized by Post this month for her willingness to speak out against what she sees as restrictions on public debate. She told Poloff she believes the charges were brought by PM Ralph Gonsalves directly, given his previous public statements questioning Baptiste's loyalty to the country following her vigorous campaigning against the government-backed constitutional referendum (ref A). According to Baptiste, Gonsalves further likened Baptiste's "Thusian Institute for Religious Liberty," an NGO she leads, to Jim Jones' "People's Temple." She further claimed that, subsequent to Gonsalves' public statements, she received verbal threats from Gonsalves' United Labor Party (ULP) sympathizers. To address the charges against her, Baptiste has since contacted the Vincentian Public Service Union and local legal counsel.

MEDIA, CAMPAIGN STRATEGISTS TARGETED

13. (C) Responding to claims made by local radio commentators Junior Bacchus and Matthew Thomas that Gonsalves had benefitted from an alleged money laundering scheme that supposedly occurred ahead of the November, 2009 constitutional referendum, the PM vowed that he would take legal action against both critics. During a February 16 interview, Gonsalves said that St. Vincent's money laundering laws and recently-established Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) would thwart any potential money laundering schemes, implying that the claims made against him were groundless. In a letter sent separately by Bacchus and Thomas to Gonsalves and the Finance Ministry (also obtained by Poloff), the claimants also allege that large sums of money -- the largest, by far, being USD \$1 million -- were deposited into the government's account at the State-owned National Commercial Bank by Gonsalves, his family, and ULP members in the run-up to the 2009 referendum. The letter further accuses Gonsalves of failing to explain the circumstances surrounding the "suspicious" transactions, calling the lack of explanation "tantamount to misbehavior in public office." The authors then called upon Gonsalves to resign immediately.

14. (C) Gonsalves threatened to sue the radio station on which the

commentators discussed their accusations for airing opposition New Democratic Party (NDP)-sponsored advertisements that he said were orchestrated by the London-based Strategic Communications Laboratories (SCL) -- a campaign strategizing firm reportedly aiding the opposition NDP. He further warned SCL that its representatives would not be able to operate in St. Vincent without valid work permits -- permits that Gonsalves himself has the authority to grant or deny. Gonsalves added that he had already won an EC \$430,000 (USD \$164,000) award from the radio station's owners for an earlier libel case.

COMMENT

15. (C) With the ULP's popularity sinking following its devastating loss in the 2009 constitutional referendum (ref B), there is little doubt that Gonsalves is feeling wounded politically and thus willing to strike out forcefully against his opponents. Ironically, one of the main charges against Gonsalves from the opposition and disgruntled ULP members alike is his increasing intolerance for dissent. These legal challenges only serve to cement that image in the public mind. Campaigning is well underway, with parliamentary elections constitutionally mandated by the end of 2010, and both camps are readying themselves for a fight -- one in which the opposition, though still struggling with internal divisions and a lack of charismatic leadership and funding, is better placed now to contest than at any point in the last three years. These latest lawsuits signal that election season is shifting into high gear in St. Vincent. End Comment.

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